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THUNDERBIRDS





ARE GO!

Remember that one special day of the week when you were but a nipper, eagerly awaiting the count-down that heralded the start of another episode of THUNDERBIRDS?

The danger, the suspense, the drama, the trying to pick the bits where you could see the strings.

More than 25 years after its inception, the coolest TV show of the 60s and major cult phenomenon is set to bombard us once again, this time on video.

Conor Walsh spoke to the guru behind the little wooden gurus, Gerry Anderson.



It is one of the marvels of the modern world that *THUNDERBIRDS* has become a huge success in its re-runs around the world. Puppet fever has gripped Japan and Holland. In the U.K, as a result of television ratings during 1992 and merchandising demands over Christmas, *THUNDERBIRDS* has been whisked into prime time on BBC2. The return of the the world's most technological minded wooden saviours seems limitless.

In Japan, after an airwave absence of 25 years, the original series was aired last April on nationwide network television to surprising results. Screened at 6.30pm, *THUNDERBIRDS* again soared to a huge ratings success. In addition to television, an extensive merchandising campaign was launched, including clothing, paper products and electronic games. The huge Japanese pop-culture market lapped it up.

The appeal of the *THUNDERBIRDS* concept is simple and straightforward. The Tracy family is committed to helping others. Always on the lookout for trouble, they seek to render assistance by reaching out to those in dire need of their help.

Their International Rescue organization is dedicated to the task of responding to world wide distress calls - "This looks like a job for International Rescue!" The family is led by Jeff Tracy, resolute ex-astronaut and multi-millionaire (the latter being quite handy when those rocket fuel bills come in every month).

Big Jeff is the founder and coordinator of International Rescue, which he oversees from his nifty, button covered desk on Tracy Island (the secret location is rumoured to be somewhere in the Pacific). He is joined by five sons, all named after famous astronauts, and a small but able support staff that includes a stammering nerd of a genius and a seductive female espionage agent.

The renewed interest in *THUNDERBIRDS* has surprised no-one more than series creator Gerry Anderson.

"We had just finished a series called *STINGRAY* and we had to have another show to go straight onto the floor," he said recalling the first days.

"Around about that time there was a mining disaster in Germany and many people were trapped underground. Over a

period of 3 days or so, I was listening to the radio and hearing that they were drilling a hole to put down oxygen, etc."

"I thought, 'Really for this kind of emergency there ought to be a supply dump somewhere with all this rescue gear waiting. Well here we are just about to make a new series, and if I



set it in the future, maybe this is the basis for a new series."

"That's how International Rescue and the Thunderbirds came about."

THUNDERBIRDS was the seventh feature marionette project for Anderson's ITC company. Why puppets?

"It just so happened that the first series we did, *The Adventures of Twizzle*, was to be made with puppets. I hated the thought of working with puppets so much that I tried to make the film as near as possible to a conventional picture in the hope the broadcasters would say 'Hey, this guy can make real pictures, let's give him something better,'" Anderson said.

"Instead they said 'Doesn't he make good puppet films! Let's give him some more!'"

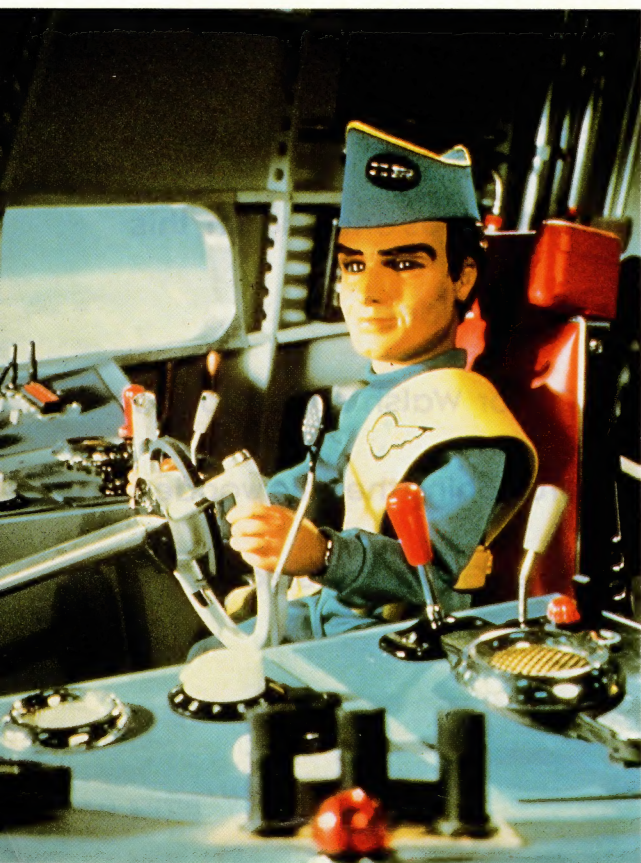
When it came time for Anderson to actually deal with real life actors, the working conditions were not all that he had expected.

"When I eventually made real-action films I suddenly found I was confronted with actors who would say 'Why is this telephone that I am speaking into red? What is the significance and how does that affect my performance?' It was then I started to think that maybe it wasn't so bad working with puppets after all."

To date there have been three more puppet series made by the ITC company; *Captain Scarlet*, *Joe 90* and *Terrahawks*, all technologically superior to *Thunderbirds*, but none with the same lingering appeal.

"I like to think that if you make something with loving care, be it a television set, a woman's dress or a puppet series, if you really care about what your'e doing, somehow it shows through," he said.

"We used to care about our work a hell of a lot. It was terribly important to us, and I think it's true to say that we left no stone unturned trying to make the shows not only good technically, but entertaining and also, dare I say it, responsible - not with gratuitous violence, and I think with all the right





messages that parents of today, even more than then, appreciate."

It is impressive to note that over a period of more than 25 years, *THUNDERBIRDS* has been sold to over 60 countries for television and to 20 countries for video release. But what are the fundamental elements of the show that attract viewers of all ages and, more importantly, after all this time?

"The show contains elements that appeal to most - danger, jeopardy and destruction - but because International Rescue's mission is to save life there is no real violence."

"Thunderbirds was an hour long which meant we could develop the characters better and if you have time in terms of story telling to say 'Is this guy a nice guy? Have you now got to like him? Oh yes you have, well now we're going to drop him in the crap and really work him to death!' You have much more impact in the story telling, added to which is not only the hardware and space travel but there is the family aspect too."

But what about the burning question on everyone's lips since day one - what does F.A.B. really mean? Fully Acknowledged Broadcast? Fat And Bouncy? Enlighten us, Mr Anderson, please!!

"Sorry to disappoint you but in the 60's the buz word was 'fabulous'. This became shortened to 'fab' and we decided to use FAB as opposed to the normal radio and telephone - 'Roger' meaning: 'message received and understood.'" Thunderbirds are go....again!

THE TEAM

SCOTT (Pilot - THUNDERBIRD 1) is the oldest. Fast talking and quick thinking, he can cope with any emergency and is skilled at organizing the rescue operations.

VIRGIL (Pilot - THUNDERBIRD 2) is reliable and steady, and just the right sort of man for the responsible task of handling the freighter containing the priceless rescue equipment. He works closely with Scott.

ALAN (Pilot - THUNDERBIRD 3) is probably the most romantic of the Tracy boys (and with a strong interest in one of the attractive female members of the crew). He has an impetuous nature and is an expert sports car driver.

GORDON (Pilot - THUNDERBIRD 4) accompanies his brother Virgil in T2 and utilises T4 when the rescue operation requires underwater work. Young and enthusiastic, Gordon has an amusing face and is quite a joker.

JOHN (Pilot - THUNDERBIRD 5) who mans the satellite station, monitoring all in-coming and out-going calls for International Rescue, has the patience of Job.

BRAINS, the bespectacled, scientific genius who invents the machines and equipment which make rescues of every kind possible. He is a typical "egg-head", shy,

intense and rather hesitant in his speech.

LADY PENELOPE, the organization's elegant, glamorous, blonde London agent who, beneath her sophisticated exterior and social graces, has all the adventurous daring of a female James Bond. She possesses an exotic wardrobe and a shocking pink Rolls Royce, number plate FAB-1.

PARKER, who is Lady Penelope's chauffeur and man-servant, is an off-beat, droll Cockney, adept at handling dangerous situations. An ex-con, now reformed, his talent for safe-blowing is highly useful to the organization when the occasion requires.

KYRANO, is Jeff Tracy's loyal servant. International Rescue's most fearsome foe holds a strange power over him.

TIN-TIN (a Malayan name meaning 'sweet') is Kyrano's daughter who has just returned from America where (no points for guessing) she was educated at Jeff Tracy's expense. She is an electronics expert and very useful to the organization, as

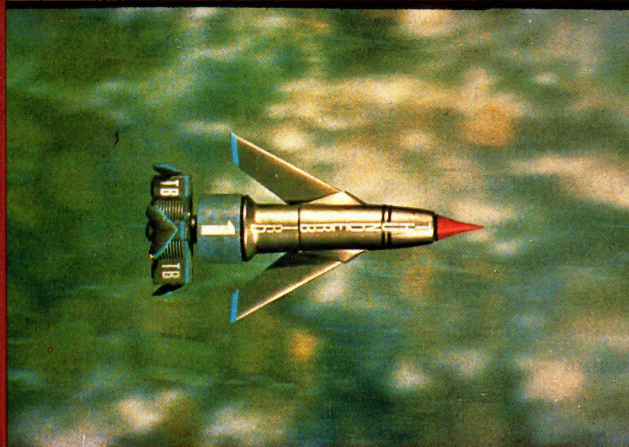
well a being romantically linked to IR's resident playboy Alan.

GRANDMA, the family matriarch. Although her grandsons are incredible international heroes, she loves "looking after her boys".

THE VILLAIN:

THE HOOD is the principle menace, a shrewd villain who dons a multitude of disguises. He is dedicated to discovering the secrets of the organization. Living in an Eastern temple, he practices his strange voodoo powers, his eyes literally lighting up when casting his evil spells. He is Kyrano's half-brother, often using him as an innocent pawn in his evil plots.





THUNDERBIRD 1

A rocket that can travel at top speed of Mach 7. T1 is the primary unit used for reconnaissance and operational direction. With the ability to fly and land horizontally, it is a highly manoeuvrable and very powerful craft.

THUNDERBIRD 2

The largest and most versatile of the launch craft, T2 is IR's workhorse. Fitted with separating pods, it can carry an arsenal of highly inventive rescue equipment, including a drilling machine called 'The Mole' and an intense laser cannon 'The Thunderizer'.

THUNDERBIRD 3

A rocketequipped for space travel capable of flying routine shuttle missions. It is used for space rescue and to access T5.

Thanks to Vision Entertainment for Photos and research

THUNDERBIRD 4

A highly advanced submersible craft. It has an array of gadgets and arms to perform any underwater task and is carried to the scene inside T2.

THUNDERBIRD 5

A sophisticated space monitoring system permanently in earth's orbit. Communications channels around the globe are monitored here, SOS call are relayed to I.R. from this orbiting command post.

FAB - 1

The six-wheeled, pink Rolls Royce belonging to Lady Penelope. Capable of over 200 mph., It possesses 'down and under' doors, retractable handcuffs for prisoners, Machine guns concealed within the radiator and hydrofoils so the car can clear water at high speed. Topped off with a bullet-proof, glass-steel canopy, this automobile is every bit as "FAB" as it's number plate suggests. ●